Contra Costa County Historical Society

BULLETIN

POST OFFICE BOX 190 NOVEMBER 1979 MARTINEZ, CALIFORNIA 94553

Somersville in 1878 was a small but busy mining community, tucked into a basin near the Manhattan, Eureka, Union and Independent Coal Mines.

DIGGING UP THE PAST IN CONTRA COSTA CO. ARCHEOLOGIST REVEALS EXCAVATION FINDS

Mention archeology and most people immediately think of diggings in ancient Egypt or unearthing the splendors of Rome.

But the same techniques used to uncover the wonders of antiquity are today being used to excavate the long-gone Contra Costa County mining town of Somersville.

Members of the Society and their guests will have an opportunity to hear the exciting story of this dig from the man in charge when Dr. James J.F. Deetz of the University of California at Berkeley addresses our next dinner meeting.

The program, slated for Thursday, November 15, will be held at the Concord Elks Club, 3994 Willow Pass Road, Concord. No-host cocktails will begin at 7 p.m. with dinner, at $7.50 per person, to be served at 7:30 p.m.

Dr. Deetz, who is in charge of a group of students from his classes at U.C.'s Department of Anthropology in the excavation of Somersville, will describe how the job is done and reveal what has been discovered to date.

Currently involved in locating and exploring the foundation of the old Hotel Somersville, the students will eventually unearth other buildings in the ghost town of the northern slopes of Mt. Diablo.

The U.C. educator will also bring slides of the diggings. An extensive display of photographs, maps and other memorabilia from the days when Somersville and her sister town, Nortonville, were busy, bustling communities will be arranged by Louis L. Stein.

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The Hotel Somersville, which is being unearthed, was a gathering place for miners and their families. At various times the hostelry was also known as the Scammon Hotel, the Hollywood Hotel and the Dickinson Hotel.

Students in the Department of Anthropology, UC Berkeley, carefully sift the soil for relics in the foundation of the old Hotel Somersville.

SOMERSVILLE'S SHORT PRODUCTIVE LIFE

Coal was the reason for the existence of towns like Nortonville and Somersville. And when there was no longer any need for the coal, the towns died as quickly as they had been born.

George W. Hawxhurst discovered the first vein of rich coal at what became the Union Mine in 1855. By 1860 the Pittsburg Coal Mine was opened at Somersville. Until 1904, when the use of oil for industrial furnaces put the coal companies out of business, the little mining community was home to 300 to 400 miners and their families.

Somersville was named for Frank Somers. The first building probably went up in 1860. In 1861 G. Griffin kept a boarding house near the Independent shaft, while an E. Hendricks operated another hostelry in the area. A later owner of this hotel, Sidney Maupin, perished with his three children when fire destroyed the place on April 8, 1863.

The first store in Somersville was opened in 1863 by Aaron H. Senderman, while in 1865 T.A. Talleyrand began and taught the first school. A church was also built in 1865. Still another hotel, the Union, was built in Somersville in 1869 by Ferdinand Gambs.

An old newspaper from 1897 — just seven years before Somersville began its decline to the status of "ghost town" — remarked of the coal mining operations: "The Company is now supplying such customers as Stockton and Sacramento River steamers, the large flour mills, State's Prison at San Quentin, Western Meat Company and many others. All this has been accomplished without a blare of trumpets . . . for the reason that predictions, in coal mining particularly, are not always fulfilled."

GUEST SPEAKER

A professor, lecturer, archeologist, writer and scholar. All these describe our guest speaker, Dr. James J.F. Deetz, professor of anthropology and director of UCB's famous Lowie Museum of Anthropology.

Dr. Deetz lists among his varied assignments: teaching fellow in Anthropology at Harvard University, archeologist for the Smithsonian Institutions's River Basin Survey, archeologist for Plimoth Plantation, Research Fellow in North American Anthropology at Harvard, and Eminent Scholar in the Department of Anthropology at the College of William and Mary.

He's served as a consultant to a variety of projects including Southside Historical Sites in Williamsburg, Virginia, and the National Park Service's Committee for the Recovery of Archeological Remains.

Dr. Deetz has been published extensively on such subjects as "Archaeological Investigations at La Purisma Mission," "Chumash Indian Art," "The Reality of the Pilgrim Fathers," and "Invitation to Archaeology."

LAFAYETTE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Professor Deetz and one of his students inspect their handiwork on completion of the excavation of the Hotel Somersville cistern.

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MEMBERSHIP MEETING

Dinner and Program

Speaker: Dr. James J.F. Deetz

Date: November 15, 1979

Place: Concord Elks Club
3994 Willow Pass Rd.
Concord

Time: 7:00 p.m.
No-Host Cocktails
7:30 p.m.
Dinner, $7.50

Reservations: J.B. Jory, Secretary
P.O. Box 190
Martinez, CA 94553
Phone: 228-4534

COME ONE! COME ALL!